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Social Competence and Pupil Strategies in Danish Classrooms

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Abstract

The school aims at developing the social competence of the children. This is explicitly stated in the national curricula of the Danish comprehensive school. It is defined that social competence is to be developed through pedagogies, in which the pupils are to be more active participants and take a greater responsibility of their own learning processes. But what does social competence mean in the pedagogic practice, and how do children of different social backgrounds position themselves in the ensuing classroom practices? These are questions that I will be dealing with in my paper, which draws on a theoretical framework inspired by Basil Bernstein and Pierre Bourdieu, and reports on the findings from my Ph.D. project. On the basis of these findings I will illustrate and discuss, how different pupil strategies relate to the social backgrounds of the children.

Introduction

This paper deals with the issue of social competence and social diversity in the Danish Folkeskole (elementary school). It is a summary of my PhD dissertation, in which I have compared the pedagogic discourses with the pedagogic practice, and is following a tradition of classroom research that applies the concepts of the hidden curriculum and social and cultural reproduction (Bernstein 2000; Bourdieu & Passeron 1990; Broady 1981; Bauer & Borg 1979; Jackson 1968). The hidden curriculum marks a distinction between the pedagogic intentions and actual practice – between discourse and practice. With focal point in this approach, the educational aims of democracy and equity have been targeted by several research projects in the Nordic countries (Moldenhawer 2003; Sahlström 1999; Österlind 1998; Callewaert & Nilsson 1980; 1979), showing that the school, contrary to its declared intentions, discriminates against various children. Research also shows that children's social backgrounds widely influence whether children will succeed in further education (Jæger et al. 2003; Munk 2001; Hansen 1995).

Social competences express contemporary intentions of educating children and youngsters in family, school and society. The concept does not appear explicitly in the Act of the Folkeskole, but it appears in profiles of many schools and is elaborated in central formulations of the elementary school curriculum. The object clause of the elementary school states the intention of socialising the children, which becomes apparent in the expression that “the school shall prepare the pupils for active participation, joint responsibility, rights, and duties in a society based on freedom and democracy”¹. The social competences thus constitute a present-day discourse that summarizes the social, concerning educational aims of the elementary school.

The crisis of discipline and the requirement of inclusion express similar discourses about the tasks of the elementary school. Related to the discourse of inclusion, social diversity or difference ap-

¹ The Folkeskole Act, cf. Consolidation Act No. 730 of 21 July 2000

appears to be a phenomenon, which is difficult to handle at Danish elementary schools. On the one hand, it is centrally decided that the elementary school aims at inclusion and individuality, at contributing to *the all-round personal development of the individual pupil*². On the other hand, it seems that inclusion and diversity is strongly limited by a dominant discourse of equity during every day practice of schools (Christiansen & Hohnen 2002; Anderson 2000). This means that too much diversity among the pupils is considered as a problem.

The theme of the dissertation focuses on the social competences and the social diversity of a school class (in the elementary school), in relation to the pedagogic practice and the pupil strategies. It builds on the thesis that children possess certain amounts of cultural capital, due to their primary socialisation, and accordingly to different degrees match the framework for socialisation of the elementary school – its requirements of social competences. It is presumed that, the pedagogic control and intensity together with the primary socialisation of the children constitute important conditions for the participation and positioning of the children in the class, in other words, for the social learning of the children.

On this background the general research questions are,

- What does the discourse of the social competences mean to the pedagogic practice? and
- In which ways do the pedagogic practice and the social diversity influence the social learning of children in the classroom?

The theoretical framework

Theoretically, the research is based on a Bourdieu inspired relational perspective (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1996). The relations account for the focal point of the analysis of the social life and are analysed according to Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus* and *field*, along with Bernstein's conceptual phrase of *the pedagogic practice*. The latter is used by approximate analogue with Bourdieu's field concept. Other primary analytical tools are Bernstein's concepts of classification and frame, partly during the analysis of the relations between discourse and practice of teaching, the pedagogic practice, and partly during the analysis of the variations within the various pedagogic practices in relation to the underlying conditions and control relations (power and control).

Following the introductory field analysis, which involves an analysis of the teachers' pedagogic strategies, the analysis focuses on the participants – the children as pupils. The analysis of the pupil participation strategies presents concrete examples of possibilities of participation, the forms of participation in an interactionist perspective, from which I have observed the pupils' strategies for participation – positioning – in relation to these possibilities. Their positioning is viewed as their interest in school, as their dispositions. The dispositions must be related to the pupil positions between them, to their social backgrounds – through the concepts of capital, which is used in a theoretical classification by volume of economic, cultural and social capital. It is thereby based on the concepts of positioning and dispositions that the relationship between distinctive groupings and pupil relations to the school is analysed.

The empirical work

My research questions indicate that there are two levels of research – discourses and practice. The discourses express intentions and conceptions (the verbally expressed), while the practice fact-

² Ibid.

specifically expresses what is taking place – actions and routines of daily life (the doing) – and is researched through fieldwork in the classroom, which is analysed through means of classroom research.

The empirical research contains material from four different school classes, a first grade, which is introductory schooling and a fourth - fifth grade, which is the intermediate stage, at two elementary schools. One of the schools is situated in a relatively homogenous area with pupils coming primarily from upper social groups and with no bilingual pupils. The other school is situated in an area with families of large variation concerning social and ethnical backgrounds. The two schools are similar in their approaches towards integration of methods to develop the social competences of the children.

The research contains various empirical elements such as questionnaires, interviews, and observations. These elements have as purpose to provide perspective on various levels of the research and at the same time provide the possibility of identifying contrasts, nuances, and patterns in the words and actions of the informants. The purpose of the questionnaire was to retrieve information about the socio-economic and cultural backgrounds of the children answered by their parents. The interview method was used in order to gain knowledge about three different perspectives, namely the school management, the teachers and the pupils. The purpose of the observations was to be close to and view the teachers and the pupils and thereby get an “objective”, an insider as well as outsider perspective on their strategies at the schools. Through the interviews that followed, I aimed at retrieving the subjective views of the strategies.

The empirical material from respectively the introductory school classes and the intermediate stages do not have the same depth and extent, due to different prerequisite conditions of the two levels. The socialisation of first grade is not yet clearly manifested. The teachers’ pedagogic strategies are however clearly manifested and thereby it becomes relevant to make parallel analyses of the teachers’ guiding angles at both class levels. Concerning the pupils’ strategies, the analysis is predominantly based on empirical material from the fourth and fifth grade pupils.

The social competences in school

The development of pupils’ social competences seems to be the school’s answer to a number of different problems within motivation and control in elementary schools. The pedagogic discourses at the analysed schools stress the intentions of viewing teaching as a whole and promoting the self-esteem of the pupils. Both schools put clear priority to the integration and competence orientation, which characterises the progressive pedagogies (according to Bernstein). From the perspective of a teacher, this discourse represents a focus on competence-oriented pedagogies (as opposed to the performance oriented pedagogies). All in all, the schools in this analysis appear as strongly oriented towards the code of integration and the invisible pedagogies, though they presume an underlying collection code. The seeming freedom of choice is based on knowledge from the pupils’ side on what is professionally relevant.

Generally, practice indicated a strong classification of the education at the two schools, contrary to the progressively oriented discourse. Most of the education follows conventional subject demarcations, despite the rhetoric about integrated comprehensiveness and thematic teaching sequences. The introductory school classes had little more elements of a weak classification than in the intermediate classes. Especially the first grade class with children from relatively resource-rich back-

grounds, while the class with children from resource-weak backgrounds had a high focus on reading training, as a sign of strong classification of knowledge. In terms of framing of the teaching, the picture varied more. During introductory schooling, the framing was not surprisingly relatively strong compared to the intermediate schooling. The educating work of introductory schooling is to raise the children's awareness of rules and regulations for what must be taught and that the teacher sets the terms. In contrast, the pupils at the intermediate level had more pupil-controlled activities and therefore also more elements of a weak framing. This was especially the case in the school class with the relatively resource-strong pupils, whereas the class with mixed and relatively resource-weak pupils had notable more pedagogic control.

The social competences, which along with the progressively oriented teaching were dominant in the discourse, seem just like the progressive orientation to be less visible in practice. This indicates that there are several external terms, such as curriculum, readers and programmes, which ahead of teachers and pupils set the frames and control the teaching. Even though social competences in the Danish elementary school are pronounced as important and in a certain way, such as self-discipline and empathy in relation to the implicit current order, this hidden curriculum might be changing. From central levels, there are more demands to the content of the teaching (aims), to teachers (obligatory teamwork) and the pupils (evaluations and tests), which narrows the opportunities for independent thinking and action of both teachers and pupils and thereby narrows their possibilities for development of social competences.

Based on an organisational distinguishing between plenum, pupil cooperation and individual pupil work, it appears that teaching organised in a certain way, require different forms of participation and correspondingly require different social competences from the pupils. Participation in plenum requires that the pupils are able to speak up and show consideration. Participation in pupil cooperation requires that the pupils are able to be responsible for both their own and other pupils' learning, and individual pupil work requires a certain amount of independence and the ability to mobilise enough concentration not to be distracted. No matter the education form, my observations point to the girls as the most participating pupils, while the least participating pupils are to be found among the groups of boys.

Pupil strategies

Gender seems to be one significant differentiation category in schools. Girls and boys are constructed and construct themselves differently between each other. In this way boys are more often than girls spoken of as 'trouble', which also applies to another differentiation category, ethnicity. In elementary schools, ethnicity is described as *culture* and the children with an ethnic minority background are described as *bilingual*. The physical manifestation of ethnical differentiation in relation to the majority of children seems to influence on which possibilities they see for themselves and which possibilities they actually meet – in this case at school. Due to their different looks and language, and as they seek one another, they distinguish themselves from the majority of children and thus contribute to the socially marginalized position, which the school culture assign them.

I have identified and constructed four types of pupils in the school classes, based on the constructed categories and the empirical material from the school classes at the intermediate level. These types of pupils illustrate how the social backgrounds of the pupils, in terms of economic, cultural, social conditions, add up together and influence their positioning as pupils.

The actively participating, socially integrated pupil was characterised by being of a resource-strong back ground – in terms of economy, socially, and culturally. She – as it is usually a girl – has large room for manoeuvre and is normally part of the decision-making at home. Both parents have active parts in the family and the pupil has social capital as she participates in several organised after school activities, has several friends through these activities and she sees friends from the school outside school activities. She considers her possibilities of decision-making – the freedom of choice – during education as good, no matter how the teaching is organised.

The actively participating, socially marginalized pupil comes from a background of mixed capital volumes. The socially marginalized position can be due to geographical long distance between home and school and thereby also the other pupils or the pupil must travel every other weekend to visit the ‘other parent’. Concerning cultural capital, the home is not particularly academic, meaning that the parents do not have academic educations but still have some sort of professional education. The number of after school activities varies, but often it is special activities which are different from the other pupils’. They thereby do not lead to social activity, which could lead to social capital of the pupil to be used at school.

The non-participating, socially integrated pupil could be part of a family with economic capital, but the contrary is often the case. The pupil, most often a boy, lives in rented accommodation perhaps with just one of the parents, but residential property can also be the case. Education-wise it might be parents with high cultural capital, but also this might not be the case. Often there is some sort of imbalance in the family – be it a divorce, unemployment, or illness. When it comes to social capital, the pupil is more well-equipped as he participates in few but popular activities outside school, such as football, which creates relations to the other pupils.

The non-participating, socially marginalized pupil is characterised by coming from a home with limited economic, social and cultural capital. The family lives in rental accommodation and no one in the family has academic educations, perhaps not even work. The pupil is often a boy and often belongs to an ethnic minority, but can also belong to the ethnic majority while still embedded in a culture foreign to schooling. He participates in only few after school activities, or none at all, and has other but relatively few friends than those from school. As a pupil he generally perceives his possibilities of choice as limited, even within a structure, which has weak frames and is based on pupil participation in principle.

The identified differences of the pedagogic practice, between the different school classes and the variation within the individual school class, can be understood as varying outcome of the struggles of the field over the symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1997). The symbolic capital of the pedagogic practice could be ‘translated’ as codes, the collection code versus the integration code, or the pedagogies – visible versus invisible – analysed by concepts of classification and frame (Bernstein 2000). This brings forth questions of how do the struggles between different codes and pedagogies correspond with the struggles of the social space. When school classes with most resource-rich children relatively have a weak framing and school classes with most resource-weak children relatively often have a strong framing but a weak classification – what is this indicator of?

Parallel to these connections in my empirical findings, studies in American schools have indicated a clear connection between the individual school’s social group composition and the pedagogic practice, especially concerning the inner framing as in hierarchical rules between teacher and pupils (Sadovnik 1995:21). The higher the socio-economic status of the pupils, the more likely it is that

hierarchical rules are implicit, and inverse, the lower the socio-economic status of the pupils, the more likely it is that the hierarchical rules are explicit and visible. Perhaps they are not surprising in that they can be viewed as a natural consequence of the established social conditions, e.g. invisible pedagogies are bound to fail in certain social connections (Bernstein 1974:161).

In overall terms and focusing on the external framing (Bernstein 2000:14), as a distinction between what is prerequisite for the situation (strong) and what is determined in the situation (weak), the similarities between the classes are more significant than the differences. It appears in all classes that the invisible pedagogies are embedded in the visible pedagogies (cf. Bernstein 2000:100). What is dominant then is strong classification in all of the classes, but with elements of a weak classification and then the framing is mostly weak, from this perspective. The weak framing contains the potential of change, as sooner or later the weak frames will influence on the classification (Bernstein 2000:15). Presently however, there seems to be signs of a movement in the opposite direction for the Danish elementary school, towards a strong external framing as curriculum and syllabus have become more and more detailed in aims and tests (Ministry of Education 2002). This will imply a strong framing concerning order and pace. What will this mean for resource-weak pupils? According to Bernstein, it implies an even stronger stratification of pupils, meaning that the less privileged might find it even more difficult to add meaning to the school.

To some children the school does not add meaning as school, due to them not being equipped with the necessary cultural conditions to see the meaning of the school (cf. Carlgren 1997). It seems evident that alternatives should be found, instead of the present focus on 'more of what we got' – which means more professional standards. Research indicates that it is a problem that the cultural grammar of the schools is based on an implicit code, which suggests that this is made more explicit, which means to take expected knowledge, about *how to go about it in school*, and phrase it and thereby make it explicit. Some schoolteachers practise such strategies, and as appears from my dissertation some teachers attempt to establish a practice based on conditions of the surrounding social environment. From this point of view, it appears to be very important not to limit the teachers' room for manoeuvre with further demands (strong framing), concerning syllabus and tests, which would be the same as limiting the teachers' ability to tailor the teaching according to local conditions.

Conclusions and perspectives

This dissertation points both to continuities and discontinuities of the pedagogic practice, discourses on social competence, social complexity and different pupil strategies of the Danish elementary school. The differences in pupil strategies could be a reminder of it being not possible to point to just one form of organisation or one method as the right one. My research thus indicates that the responsibility for children's socialisation in school cannot be placed merely at the teacher or at the pupil, but must be seen in far more complex social connections. Nevertheless are a number of efforts being made, in the public and political field, to place responsibility for social issues and problems at the schools, such as negative social heritage and structure problems at the labour market, which are controlled by other complex structures, outside the scope of the school. The development at the field of schools appears to be present, both in Denmark and internationally, and is controlled by a thinking based on economic rationality, which focuses on measurability. In addition, it is politically stated that it is scientifically possible to measure the effect of different kinds of policy and practice, with increased emphasis on quantifiable measures and technical directions to the pedagogic participants.

This happens despite both national and international research pointing to the fact that good practice for one class is not necessarily good practice for another (Fink-Jensen et al. 2004). Comparisons of schools and pupil conditions across international borders have shown that institutional and cultural conditions of the individual countries are important for the children's relations to the school (Osborn et al. 2003). Danish pupils have generally been the most positive concerning schooling, their view on teachers and on learning. They tend to view the school as a process of learning to work in a social situation, rather than as an individual development process. At the same time they are less inclined to leave school as soon as possible, than the French or English pupils (Osborn et al. 2003). The English pupils wanted to leave school sooner and were the least positive. This is worth noticing, as the English school seems even further ahead than the Danish concerning the standardisation of curriculum and orientation towards aims and control by market mechanisms.

Nevertheless, efforts over the past decades have been made to reform the Danish elementary and secondary school in this direction. A number of changes in the law and suggestions to changes, which politically are reasoned with reference to globalisation and international surveys, have been made, as well as a more uniform framework for the school and a strengthening of the subjects is introduced (Ministry of Education 2002), in other words, more standardisation and more professional standards of the measurable kinds. The current efforts were legally set off by the Common Aims, which are established syllabus for all subjects at elementary and secondary school. In practice, professional standards seem to have been explicit always – the school is to a large extent the school subjects, which my research indicates.

How does the strong orientation towards professional standards influence on the children's social and personal development in the school? There seems to be good reason to worry that the balance between the cognitive and the affective will balance in favour of the cognitive (cf. Ravn 2005). The movement is clearly going towards more professional standards as in instrumental knowledge, more focus on the individual pupil, instead of education towards cooperation, and more measuring of skills. In practice, this will be carried out as tests every year in every subject. Generally, the development points to a strong priority to the collection code, strong classification and strong framing, which could mean a disappearance of the teacher's autonomy as professional with a replacement of canon, measurements and tests. Despite the mentioning of inclusion and providing possibilities for everyone, inclusion in this context includes, that *the individual child must be brought as far ahead as possible* (Ministry of Education 2002). There are no practical countermeasures against the increased stratification, which the other steps will cause.

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